

- **Proteus:** a sea god from Greek mythology. He is able to change shape at will. Some students may remember from The Odyssey that Odysseus had to wrestle Proteus for information about getting home to Ithaca.
- **Triton:** another sea god who serves Poseidon from Greek mythology. His special role is blowing a conch that controls the waves, the “wreathéd horn.”

Student questions about Proteus and Triton provide an opportunity to teach about allusion. Adding the term to our word wall of literary terminology, I tell students that allusions are references to something from history, religion, mythology, or literature. I invite them to bring in copies of literary allusions they find in the newspaper. Our display of allusions in the news grows quickly. Examples:

- “Something Rotund in the State of Denmark,” an article on overeating in Scandinavia
- “Harvard? The Horror, the Horror!” an article on competition in Harvard Law School
- “The Crime of Punishment Taints All of America,” an editorial on prison reform

The Sonnet: A Refresher

Though most students were taught the sonnet form in ninth grade when they studied Romeo and Juliet, it is never a bad thing to remind them of what they should know.

The Sonnet

A sonnet has 14 lines and is usually written in iambic pentameter. Italian sonnets (Petrarchan) are divided into two parts, an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet. The octave typically presents a problem that the sestet resolves. The rhyme scheme of the octave is abbaabba. The rhyme scheme of the sestet is cdcdcd.

In the first eight lines and the first half of line 9, the speaker in Wordsworth’s sonnet criticizes his times for being too much caught up in the material world. He feels society is “out of tune” with Nature.

In the middle of line 9, the poem turns on the exclamation, “Great God!” In the remaining lines of the sonnet, the speaker declares with passion his preference for the pagan world, which though primitive compared with the contemporary world, remained in touch with nature and the mysteries of life.

Discussion Questions

I always invite students to consider why Wordsworth would choose such a traditional structure for a poem advocating a return to more primitive times.

Other questions that trigger stimulating discussion include:

- Do you find that electronic devices like cell phones cause the world to be too much with you?
- Is a return to more primitive ways a practical solution?
- Do you think it is possible to remain in tune with Nature and yet “get and spend”?

Poetry can be a vehicle for powerful thinking. Feed your students well.

The Sonnet As a Doorway to Poetry

Ellen Greenblatt

“Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat.” — Robert Frost

“Poetry should be like fireworks, packed carefully and artfully, ready to explode with unpredictable effects.” — Lilian Moore

“Poetry must have something in it that is barbaric, vast and wild.” — Denis Diderot

Everyone, it seems, has something to say about poetry. But while the writers above are so passionate about its powers and possibilities, our students are sometimes daunted by the form, uncertain how to enter, and tentative about what to do after they can paraphrase the writer’s ideas.

A challenging, manageable, and finally, exhilarating way to begin, I have found, is with the sonnet, starting with Renaissance sonnets and moving to the present. The sonnet form is economical, even for poetry, itself the most economical of literary forms. And, though Renaissance sonnets are tough, they ultimately yield up their meanings while simultaneously making students aware of the importance of being able to recognize the shorthand of biblical and classical allusions.

So I invite students to begin a yearlong course in literature with an exploration of poetry and the amazing variety possible within the restricted form of 14 lines of iambic pentameter.

Writing to Learn: The Thought Piece

The basis of “writing to learn” in my classes is what I call the “thought piece.” In this homework assignment—which for most occasions replaces in-class reading quizzes for poetry, prose, and drama—students begin with a word, a line, a section, an opinion, an argument, or a question (to which they do not have to know the answer). They use the beginning they have selected to attempt to write their way into an understanding of the piece they are preparing for class discussion. This focused free write frequently leads them into questions and insights they didn’t know they had. I assign a 1-10 score for thought pieces (based mainly on their exhibition of effort—scores of 7 and above are satisfactory), and though they are not meant to be revised, thought pieces might well become the basis of a more formal paper.